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Harry Zubkoff And His Pentagon Papers

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By Richard Scheinin

It is 7:30 a.m. when Harry M. Zubkoff, five-foot-five and wearing his Stetson cowboy hat, walks through the Pentagon's River Entrance, rides the escalator to his office tucked away on the fourth floor. There, on a desk, is a box of corn flakes, a hot plate and a frying pan. Zubkoff's staff has been working since 2 a.m.—as usual—combing America's newspapers for every item of news about the military. Each day, they cast a fine skein net and fish out the biggest defense stories for reproduction in a ten-page compendium called the *Current News*, also known as the "Early Bird," the "Yellow Bird" (its front page is yellow) and "Zubkoff's Clips."

Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger is also beginning his first meeting at 7:30, and a copy of the *Current News* is in his lap. Copies of the *Current News* will soon arrive at Washington's think tanks, where people who write defense policy recommendations will fight over them at the Xerox machine. And all day long in the Pentagon press room, reporters will read the *Current News* to get story ideas, check the competition and see if Harry Zubkoff, chief of the News Clipping & Analysis Service at the Pentagon, has put their bylines on the desks of potential sources and in Caspar Weinberger's lap.

The "Early Bird" went to bed at 5:45 a.m. (as it does every weekday). Within minutes afterward, government chauffeurs, including those of Weinberger and Vice President George Bush, arrived at Zubkoff's office to pick up Xeroxed copies for their bosses. About 4,000 copies began to be delivered throughout the Pentagon by courier and a network of pneumatic tubes.

Now, as Zubkoff arrives for work, his staff is sifting through dozens of late-arriving newspapers. The stories chosen in this second round of winnowing may either wind up in the late-morning, 22-page "Main Edition" of the *Current News*, in the nearly 100-page package of "Supplemental Clips" Zubkoff publishes each day or in one of his "special editions" on terrorism or waste or "Star Wars" technology or whatever else Zubkoff judges most important in the news. More likely, they will be filed and stored inside the 20 eight-foot-high sliding walls of the office morgue. Zubkoff's morgue contains 2.5 million clips, plus another 1.5 million on microfilm.

When Zubkoff took over the News Clipping & Analysis Service in 1970, the *Current News* was already a finely tuned machine. But he has broadened its mandate so that it is influential throughout and beyond the defense community; it is must reading not only for policy makers and reporters but for Pentagon staffers, for military contractors, intelligence experts, even historians who view it as a convenient and unparalleled source of information on the military since World War II.

Before the start of the CBS-Westmoreland libel trial, *New York Times* reporter M.A. Farber checked Zubkoff's files as part of his research on what the press had reported in the

"He converts an otherwise illiterate Pentagon into a somewhat literate one."

1960s regarding enemy troop strength in Vietnam. Henry Kissinger, who 40 years ago served with Zubkoff in the U.S. Army as a special agent in a small counterintelligence unit in Europe, had a researcher use the files for his memoirs, *White House Years* and *Years of Upheaval*. Zubkoff is not awed by such fast company. The last time he saw investigative reporter Seymour M. Hersh, author of *The Price of Power: Kissinger in the Nixon White House*, he says, "I told him, 'You should have been here to use the files,' and he said he regretted not having come because he left a few things out. He would have found them here. He did a hatchet job on Kissinger."

The Pentagon could have a public relations expert running this operation, pulling together a few pro-Pentagon pieces each morning for the people in the building to read. To its credit, the Department of Defense has, instead, Zubkoff, 63, who says, "Just because someone writes a nice story—if it doesn't add anything to the debate and the dialogue on national security, we don't use it."

Zubkoff rose through the ranks of the clippings service for 20 years before taking over the Air Force's News Clipping and Analysis Service, which publishes the *Current News*, 15 years ago. He is a rarity, a model civil servant who carefully selects, according to his definition of news, the most important stories of the day for his bosses to read. Although Zubkoff's staff has been cut in half—from about 30 to 16—since 1970, his office today publishes more than ten times more material than it did 15 years ago. When the *Armed Forces Journal International* wrote in 1979 that Zubkoff runs a "publishing empire," it was accurate.

This morning in the *Current News* office, one staffer is reading a book called *The Energy Balance in Northeast Asia* (presumably it will be reviewed in "The Friday Review of Defense Literature," Zubkoff's weekly guide to arcane treatises on or related to matters of defense). In a corner is a telecopy machine installed three years ago by the *Los Angeles Times* to transmit its Pentagon reporters' stories directly to the *Current News* in time for the "Early Bird" deadline. It did not work properly and is no longer used, so the late-arriving *Los Angeles Times*, to its consternation, appears less frequently in Zubkoff's clips than it would like. Elsewhere, bundles of newspapers and files full of clippings are strewn on desk tops and on the floor. The wall-to-wall orange-brown carpet is littered with newspaper shavings. Zubkoff—an indexer, a man of order—spots something amidst the shavings. It is a cigarette butt. He scoops it up and tosses it in a waste basket.

Then he walks into his private office, where a pile of new magazines sits waiting on his desk. The phone rings. A newspaper editor in California wants a subscription to the *Current News*. This can be arranged, Zubkoff says, in exchange for a subscription to the newspaper. (Exchanging publications that Zubkoff can use is the only way anyone outside government can get the *Current News*.) "If I could sell it," he says of the *Current News*, "I could make a fortune."

The stack of magazines in front of him includes *Sea Power, U.S. Army Aviation Digest, Army*, the *New Yorker, Defense and Foreign Affairs, Jane's Defence Weekly, Soldier of Fortune* and *Popular Mechanics*, which has an article this week on "shotgun bombing," a concept, Zubkoff explains, that "basically means the more bombs you drop, the more likely you are to hit something." Zubkoff is a speed-reader. The *Current News* receives 300 magazines and periodicals and he reads 15 to 20 of them daily, choosing the "think pieces" that will appear in the "Supplemental Clips."

"I believe Secretary Weinberger should be aware of the articles I include," he says, "and from what I hear, he reads them avidly."

The "Radio-TV Defense Dialogue" also is distributed daily by Zubkoff's office. It is a collection of verbatim excerpts from American network news broadcasts, compiled by Radio-TV Reports, Inc.

Robert W. Komer, undersecretary of defense for policy during the Carter administration, says Harry Zubkoff "is one of the darnn unsung heroes of Washington. He converts an otherwise illiterate Pentagon into a somewhat literate one. . . . The *Current News* is an indispensable tool in policy formation."

Richard Halloran, Pentagon reporter for the *New York Times*, says, "The 'Early Bird'—and I hate to admit this—may be the best-read thing in Washington. It's even better-read than the *New York Times*. Enormously influential."

David Wood, now national security reporter for Newhouse News Service, used to cover defense for the *Los Angeles Times*. It was at his urging that the *Times* installed the telecopy machine in the *Current News* office: "It upset me greatly that I was writing all that and not getting anything in the clips," he explains. "If you're an out-of-town paper and you don't appear in the clips, you don't appear at all. If your object is to try and influence policy makers, and you don't appear in the clips, you're not a play maker."

The *Current News* came into being during the bitter competition among the military services that followed World War II, when the Army, Navy and Air Force were first merged into the National Defense Establishment, later the Department of Defense. Because the three services were gathered under one wing, each fought to redefine its mission, to stake out its own turf. The competition crystallized around the assignment to the Air Force of the military's principal strategic bombing responsibility. Rumors were floated about political influence and fraud in the Air Force procurement program for the new B-36 bomber. During a House investigation of the B-36, the press was filled with stories of the controversy and Secretary of the Air Force W. Stuart Symington wanted to keep an eye on the daily coverage.

"The services were tearing each other up pretty good," recalls Dr. Murray Green, a historian who preceded Zubkoff

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as head "There were two sets of facts: what was happening and what the press said was happening. It was important to keep track of what the newspapers were saying. Symington wanted the stuff collected." Green's office began clipping the newspapers and they passed their efforts along to Symington and a handful of his top assistants. And the *Current News* was born.

About this time, Harry Zubkoff had just left his hometown of Buffalo, New York, for Washington, D.C., and a government career. Zubkoff had grown up in Buffalo, graduating from high school in 1938. He intended to go to college but could not afford it because both his parents were terminally ill. Instead, he took a job with Bell Aircraft and, in 1943, enlisted in the Army, where he was assigned to intelligence and studied German at Fort Holabird in Baltimore.

In December 1944, he was sent to Germany as part of a small counterintelligence corps detachment that included Kissinger. They investigated cases of espionage and sabotage in France and Germany, and after V-E Day, helped track down Nazis and interviewed German military and intelligence officers. When Zubkoff eventually returned to Buffalo, he took a job as a commercial flight instructor. When that job ended, he moved to Washington, where the newly established CIA recognized his World War II intelligence experience and offered him a job overseas. "But I had a brand new baby boy and my wife wouldn't have heard of me going overseas," he says. "But for the grace of God, I would have been one of those spooks." Zubkoff settled for something more prosaic, a temporary desk job with the Veterans Administration. Then, in 1950, as the Air Force news clipping operation was being formalized, he took a job working for Murray Green in what was then called the Air Force Office of Special Projects.

Zubkoff, then a GS-5, spent most of his time then and in the years to come writing studies and position papers for officials on Air Force readiness, the role of air power in the Korean War. He wrote speeches for Air Force secretaries and brass, and began to select think pieces for them to read. His major practice of journalism was his part-time, extra-curricular editorship of a weekly community newspaper, the *Greenbelt* (Maryland) *News Review*, for most of the period from 1951 to 1963.

In those days, the *Current News* was edited by Jim Killingbeck, an ex-policeman, who worked through the night standing at a draftsman's table, directing traffic and making most of the news judgments. The *Current News* was produced on a photostat machine, and each copy was stapled together by the staff, which included Sergeant Amabel Early, the oldest enlisted woman in the Air Force in the early 1950s. A mimeograph machine, circulation to expand from a handful of copies, delivered to the very top Air Force officials, to about 200 in the Pentagon. Zubkoff calls it a "technological breakthrough . . . now we started giving the *Current News* to the secretary of defense and some of the assistant secretaries, some of the Army people and Navy people."

A bigger breakthrough occurred in 1963. Until then, each of the three services, the office of the secretary of defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff had had their own news clipping operations. The office of the secretary of defense saw the duplication and decided to tighten the budget belt. The Air Force News Service was judged to be the best of the bunch, so the others were merged into it. The *Current News* remained technically under the command of the Air Force, as it does today, but it became the chief connection between the nation's press and the entire Department of Defense.

The circulation of the *Current News* expanded with the explosion of press coverage of the Vietnam war and it developed into a key information source for the military, as well as a historical source. Anyone interested today in the CBS-Westmoreland controversy over U.S. estimates of enemy troop strength, Zubkoff says, should look at the clips: "We ran all the articles we could find in those days that talked about body count and enemy strength figures. All of the discussions . . . were printed in the newspapers and carried in the *Current News*."

When Murray Green retired in 1970, Zubkoff was appointed to his job, taking over the Pentagon's daily clippings service. He left the day-to-day operation of the *Current News* to Jim Killingbeck's team of veterans and further developed the "Friday Review of Defense Literature." He got in touch with think tanks all over the United States, as well as in Canada, England, France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Israel and Japan—between 150 and 200 policy studies institutions—and began to review their work in the "Friday Review of Defense Literature." Until then, he says, they were "almost working in a vacuum." Then he eliminated an afternoon edition of the *Current News*—most readers seemed to lose interest after their second cup of coffee—and began publishing special editions.

Zubkoff fought off occasional attempts by Pentagon brass to influence the mix of stories in the *Current News*: "He generally had the guts to stand up and say, 'Hey, this is news, folks. It's already out there,' " says Brant Keller, a former Zubkoff top assistant. Keller remembers only one instance in which Zubkoff was asked to hold a story critical of the Pentagon from the clips. The order came indirectly from an unnamed secretary of defense. (Zubkoff says he ran the story the following day.)

If reporters in the Pentagon press bkoff's story selection, it is that he draws too heavily on stories from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. "UPI and AP rarely make it," complains UPI Pentagon reporter Richard Gross. "I've told Zubkoff, 'Well, it would be nice to see some more UPI material,' and his answer was, 'Well, we don't like to duplicate.' " Nevertheless, Gross says he reads "every page of it every day," and regards the *Current News* as an unbiased source of information.

Circulation for the "Early Bird" alone, inside and outside the Pentagon, is about 6,000, Zubkoff says, although at least 15,000 of the 23,000 people who work in the Pentagon would like to get it. Stephen Hess, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and author of *The Government/Press Connection*, says, "It's used by reporters, it's used by people on the Hill. The State Department doesn't do anything comparable, but they say, 'Hey, we get the Defense Department's thing.' " There are even stories that entrepreneurs have tried to steal the "Early Bird," duplicate it and sell it to contractors for a hefty fee.

The military has come to count on the "Early Bird" as its first link each day to the press, the public, the world. Robert J. Murray, former undersecretary of the Navy, calls it "a daily must read, like the morning intelligence summary, like the cables from Moscow." Ben Schemmer, editor of *Armed Forces Journal International*, says four-star retirees "miss their chauffeurs and their stewards, but what they really want is to get their 'Early Bird.' "He recalls a trip to the Middle East in 1979 with former secretary of defense Harold Brown: "It was February and they had just taken our people hostage for the first time in Tehran, the ambassador had just been shot in Kabul. It was a real megillah. Well [the secretary of defense] had all these super sophisticated communications systems and the guy couldn't wait to get his 'Early Bird' in his pouch."

The *Current News* begins to take shape daily at 2 a.m., when Assistant Editor Cris Schall arrives at the office with three assistants and four copies of the *Washington Post*. During the next hour, the *Washington Times* is delivered. And at 4:30 a.m., a courier from a newspaper

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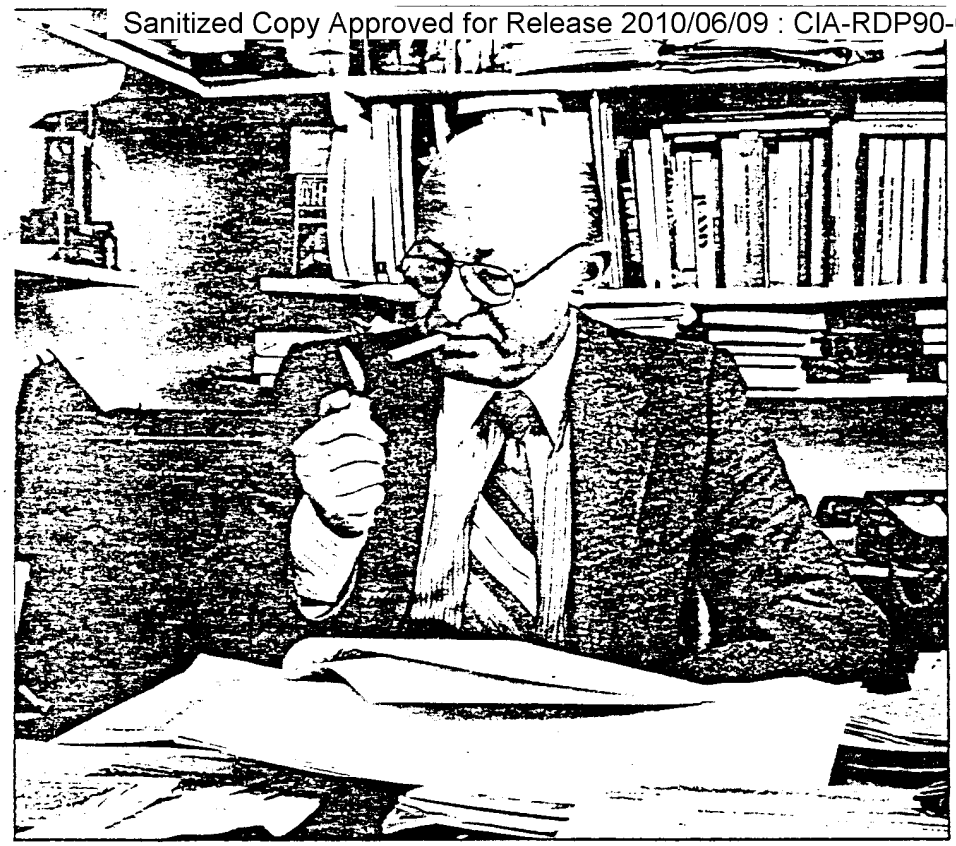

The standards of selection are Zubkoff's.

wholesaler delivers the *New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Christian Science Monitor, Philadelphia Inquirer,* Baltimore *Sun, Chicago Tribune, New York Daily News, New York Post* and the previous day's edition of the Baltimore *News-American.* Schall and her staffers busily screen the papers—two copies of each so that the front and back of every page can be clipped.

The standards of selection are Zubkoff's. "Early Bird" stories, he says, must pertain primarily to defense or national security affairs—the stories that drive and focus the discussion at Weinberger's staff meeting, big budget stories on arms negotiations, military readiness problems, weapons and equipment. To ensure the proper selection, Zubkoff trains his people to have a newspaper editor's eye for the telling detail and the fresh perspective. "My objective," he says, "is to make the people who are working on the *Current News* think the way I think."

By 5 a.m., the screening is completed. The stories are laid out by Schall and, by 5:45 a.m., finally delivered to the Pentagon's printing shop in an adjoining room where three small Davidson offset presses are starting to roll. Then the "Early Bird" is telecopied to the Strategic Air Command at Offutt Air Force Base in Omaha, Nebraska, the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado, the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), also in Colorado Springs, and the rapid deployment force at MacDill Air Force Base near Tampa, Florida. "They're there all night and they're waiting," says *Current News* Editor Daniel Friedman, Schall's immediate boss. "We're giving them the cream of the news." A copy is also telecopied to the *New York Times.* Cris Schall relates: "I was working Veterans Day, and the man from the *Times* called me in a panic: 'Where is it?' I had to tell him, 'We're not publishing today.' " And, every working day, the chauffeurs are lining up at the office.

The *Current News* is the Pentagon's early warning system, earning it the nickname "The Yellow Peril." Pentagon staffers read the clips at dawn to pick up negative static in the press, then scramble to defuse problems before they get the phone calls from their bosses. Even Secretary of the Air Force Verne Orr takes heed: "Boy, if Zubkoff's got a lead article that's critical of something, and I'm downstairs to see Secretary Weinberger, you can bet that's going to be the first item on the agenda . . . It's the key to getting your rebuttal together."

The Pentagon is an institution of transients, where Harry Zubkoff represents continuity. There are those who claim the *Current News* and the way it plays the day's stories affects the formulation of defense policy. But that is tough to prove. Although he distills and therefore amplifies the news, Zubkoff is merely the messenger. Michael I. Burch, assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, says the *Current News* "is just one of the things we use to get our information."

But Zubkoff may affect policy just the same. For example, in the days following the U.S. invasion of Grenada in October 1983, the *Current News* was filled with stories of press criticism of the decision not to send reporters in with the troops. [illegible] the Pentagon that the *Current News* concentrated dose of media criticism caught policy makers by surprise and played an indirect role in Secretary Weinberger's appointment of the Sidle Commission to study what role the press should play in such an operation in the future. In the following months, Zubkoff published seven special editions on Grenada and press reaction to the invasion. A good deal of the material, which totaled 595 pages and came from newspapers and magazines all over the country, was critical. The commission, chaired by retired Army Major General Winant Sidle, eventually recommended that a pool of reporters travel with the troops in the future.

"Did Harry Zubkoff do it himself? No," says one Defense Department official. "Did he play a part in it? Yes. We set up the commission because there had been complaints . . . and we heard them through Harry's sheet."

That official compares the effect of the *Current News* on policy to the gentle action of "drops of water on rocks." Some go further. Dr. Edward N. Luttwak, senior fellow at the Georgetown Center for Strategic and International Studies and a consultant to the Defense Department, says, "I can't think of a project I've worked on in recent years that hasn't benefited from Zubkoff. I find him indispensable . . . I testified for the Kissinger Commission on Central America and drafted a large portion of the security chapter [of the commission's report]. And I lived off of Zubkoff."

Reporters see similar benefits to their reporting. "At the end of the week," says Richard Halloran of the *New York Times,* "I will have read everything they have put out. It keeps me up on the competition in an economical, efficient way. . . . The criticism that we don't get out enough and smell the Cosmoline and talk to the troops is a valid one. And one of the ways you overcome it is to see some of the clips from the hinterlands that are collected in the 'Early Bird.' "

Halloran says it is not unusual for him to get a story idea from the clips: "Sure, I'm one of the biggest thiefs in the world." His colleague at the *Times,* Leslie Gelb, says the *Current News* often "triggers in my mind something out of a conversation I've had in the weeks before, and then I say, 'Hey, there's a thread. There must be something to this.' " David Wood of Newhouse News Service cites a specific example. Last spring, Wood noticed a reference in Zubkoff's "Friday Review of Defense Literature" to "the warrior ethic in the Army and how it fits into the atmosphere of an all-volunteer force. Well," he says, "I turned it into a story on the all-volunteer force and the difficulty of keeping a fighting ethic in peacetime."

Author Stephen Hess remembers spending some time in the Pentagon press room one morning in December 1981 after the "Early Bird" had just arrived.

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There was a *Philadelphia Inquirer* story on its front page that described Defense Department opposition to threats by the White House and State Department to use force in Central America. The prominent play in the "Early Bird" seemed to give it special importance to a reporter who was talking to Hess: "He began saying to me, 'Gee, I've been meaning to do a story like that.' The clips are almost a service [reporters] subscribe to for ideas."

Not every reporter uses the *Current News* in this fashion. Fred Hoffman, who covered defense for the Associated Press for more than 20 years before he recently became the principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for public affairs, says, "There's been a lot of inflation about Zubkoff's importance. . . . I'm a reporter, not a copier. I don't take my lead from what's in someone's publication."

Charles Corddry, veteran defense reporter for the Baltimore *Sun*, agrees. "Never," says Corddry, "have I discussed with a reporter whether to follow up something in the *Current News*."

Even so, Corddry's position as dean of the Pentagon press corps has probably been enhanced by Harry Zubkoff: "Almost everyone in the Pentagon who reads Charlie Corddry reads him in Zubkoff's sheet and not in the Baltimore *Sun*," says Tom Ross, assistant secretary of defense for public affairs during Jimmy Carter's administration, "because not too many people in Washington read the Baltimore *Sun*, and Charlie would very often lead Zubkoff's paper when he would be inside his own paper."

Harry Zubkoff pushes a button and one of the walls in the office morgue slides along a track, creating an aisle that is lined floor-to-ceiling with clip files. "You can get three times as much file space in a given area as you would if you used regular files. It's great," Zubkoff says.

The sliding walls stand where the round table once stood. It was, he says, "the biggest round table you ever saw. Eight people sat around that round table and each one had room to spread out newspapers. This was our reading-screening-clipping table . . . about 20 feet in diameter. It was fine while it lasted for many, many years. But it did waste space in the sense that when you have a table that's 20 feet in diameter, the middle part is beyond the reach of anybody, so the middle part tended to accumulate all kinds of garbage." The round table was removed in 1979 at the direction of Robert McCormick, administrative assistant to the secretary of the Air Force and Zubkoff's boss. "I was sorry to see it go," Zubkoff says, "but times change."

There is a side of Harry Zubkoff that seems consumed by minutiae. This side of Zubkoff dismisses the notion that there is any cosmic significance to his work at the *Current News*. "Anybody could have been doing this job," he says. It's routine work. "We've got all the clips laid out. It's easy to take them and divide them into subject areas. It's easy to put compilations together." The main function of the News Clipping & Analysis Service is to provide background information to speech writers and policy makers. The *Current News* is merely an offshoot of that function. "It has become," he says, "the tail that wags the dog."

But he is also intensely proud of his accomplishments. If it weren't for the *Current News*, he says, people in the Pentagon "probably would not read anything except official papers." He sees himself as an educator: "If you read the *Current News* for a year, you'd be one of the best-informed persons in the world." He sees the *Current News* as a bridge-builder. "It helps to form an esprit in the Pentagon. People read it and they realize there's a great community of interests in this building." He sees it as a catalyst in policy formulation. "The *Current News* brings to people who read it a variety of views, and this in turn forces those people to think about the different views . . . and it forces them to come to some conclusions about what their own views are."

After 35 years, Zubkoff considers himself a serious student of military policy and strategy. "But the press is the thing I really know about," he says, and Zubkoff is highly critical of the press. He believes the press "is an essential part of our society; we as a government, as a society, as a democracy, we couldn't function, we couldn't survive, without the press." But he also attacks it.

He rails against the press for disinterring the same stories time and again and never understanding them: "Every couple of years, readiness becomes a hot issue and every time it pops up the media seem to discover readiness all over again. Readiness is a constant concern of the military," he says, exasperated, while striding down a hallway to one of the Pentagon cafeterias. A reserved, thoughtful man, he usually eats lunch alone and does not talk much to his staff.

He waves to Major General James C. Pfautz, assistant chief of staff of Air Force intelligence, who says, "Harry, thanks for the D-Day series," a reference to Zubkoff's epic, six-part, 567-page series of special editions last summer commemorating the 40th anniversary of the Allied storming of the Normandy beaches. Then Zubkoff goes on: The press sensationalizes, he says. "Every school in the country has cheating scandals, but do they get the kind of attention the military academies get?" If you spend a day with Zubkoff, you hear more: "I don't have a voice in making policies. I'm not privy to the inner councils. But if I were a member of the decision-making groups, I could perhaps introduce a different perspective, that perspective being that WE SHOULD NOT PAY SO MUCH ATTENTION TO THE MEDIA."

So, why has he devoted his professional life to distributing the press reports that flow across the desks of thousands of Pentagon officials? Doesn't that contradict his feelings about the press? "It does bother me," he answers. "Still, that's my job . . . I'm doing what I'm being paid to do."

Despite his complaints, Zubkoff says that the overall quality of defense reporting is better now than ever: "The people who are writing about defense on a full-

time basis, the reporters who cover the Pentagon beat, are all knowledgeable and responsible and trying to do the best they can." And he says that over time, despite all the inaccuracies and distortions, the press usually manages to get the story right: "If you read it all, you're going to see that the press is doing a magnificent job, but no one story does it." This, he says, is a goal of the *Current News*: to convey the big story over time.

At 63, Harry Zubkoff has been talking about his impending retirement for years. He says he may finally carry out his threat in a year or two. Reflecting on his career, Zubkoff remarks, "I'm not the most talented guy in the world. But I feel I found a place where I could make a contribution, and I've enjoyed doing it."

"He's the great educator of the Pentagon," says Edward N. Luttwak, the defense consultant.

"He is one of the most important and unknown people at the Pentagon," says Daniel Z. Henkin, assistant secretary of defense for public affairs from 1969 to '73.

"I don't think I'm one of the most important, and I also think I'm one of the best known. My name shows up so often on all our publications," answers Zubkoff, precisely. Harry M. Zubkoff, GM-15, says: "You can put me down as a guy who loves his job." ●